

**Whitehorse Ranch Permit Change
Environmental Assessment
EA # OR-030-03-002**

BLM OFFICE: Vale District, Jordan Resource Area

PROPOSED ACTION: Modify the Whitehorse Ranch's grazing permit to allow winter grazing to begin on October 1 and end on January 31.

LOCATION: Coyote Lake Allotment (#10804)

APPLICANT: Whitehorse Ranch (Britt Lay)

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLAN

This proposed action is subject to the following land use plan:

Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision, September 2002

This plan has been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms to the land use plans terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5.

This project is in conformance with the SEORMP and ROD and the following objective:
Rangeland/Grazing Use Objective: Provide for a sustained level of livestock grazing consistent with other resource objectives and public land use allocations.

NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

The primary need for the proposed action is to facilitate livestock management and increase herd health in the Coyote Lake Allotment. The Coyote Lake Allotment is located approximately 4 miles south of Burns Junction. The east boundary is Highway 95 and the south boundary is the Whitehorse Road. The west boundary is the rim area above the Alvord Desert. Currently, the Whitehorse Ranch's permit is as follows:

Whitehorse Butte Allotment (1206)	1671 Cattle	03/16 – 08/31
Coyote Lake Allotment (10804)	713 Cattle	11/01 – 11/30
	781 Cattle	12/01 – 02/28

The Whitehorse Ranch turns their cattle onto the Whitehorse Butte Allotment on March 16th. The cattle graze healthy BLM range until August 31st. They are then trailed to the Whitehorse Ranch's private land. The calves are weaned immediately and the cows are turned out to graze private meadows. The meadows will feed the cows for only 30 days (around October 1st) at which point the ranch begins to feed hay. If the cattle could be turned out on the Coyote Lake Allotment on October 1st, then no hay feeding would be required. On November 1st, the cattle are released into the Coyote Lake Allotment. For the next three months, the body condition score of the mature cows slowly decline because the dormant vegetation is lacking energy, protein, and other vital nutrients. When the cattle return to the ranch on February 28th, they are weak and calving is impeded. Therefore, the cattle must be held at the ranch and fed quality hay until their condition improves. Currently, the cattle have 16 days (March 1- March 16) to regain strength and weight before they are turned out into the Whitehorse Butte Allotment. If the cattle

were fed for 45 days, they would be much healthier, give birth to a healthier calf and breed back easier.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Alternative I: Proposed Action

The proposed action is to modify the permittee's ten year grazing permit from

Coyote Lake Allotment (10804)	713 Cattle	11/01	11/30	703 AUMs
	781 Cattle	12/01	02/28	2311 AUMs

to

Coyote Lake Allotment (10804)	745 Cattle	10/01	01/31	3014 AUMs
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The only change is to allow the cattle into Coyote Lake Allotment one month earlier and have them leave the allotment one month earlier. The AUMs would remain the same.

B. Alternative II: No Action

The permit would not be changed.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

1. Vegetation

The allotment is characterized by flat topography with gently rolling hills. It is categorized as a cold desert typical of the land found in the Great Basin. Elevations range from 4000 feet to 5500 feet. Most precipitation occurs during winter and spring. The growing season is approximately 100 days occurring in March, April, May and June. Bottlebrush squirreltail (*Elymus elymoides*) is the key species in this allotment. The critical growing period for bottlebrush squirreltail is May 20th thru June 20th. There are also areas of Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*) and bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) scattered throughout the allotment. Many areas located in the lower elevation portions of the allotment have a cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) understory. Shrub types consist of shadscale (*Atriplex confertifolia*), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), low sagebrush (*Artemisia arbuscula*), greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), and spiny hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*).

2. Soils and Water Resources

The soils found in the allotment were surveyed and described in Oregon's Long Range Requirements for Water 1969, Appendix I-11 and I-12, Owyhee Drainage Basin and Malheur Lake Drainage Basin respectively. The area consists of forty-five soil mapping units from this fourth-order soil survey. The forty-five units incorporate twenty classification units that occur in various percentages within each unit and have slope groups that range between 0-60+ percent.

Soils within this area consist of very shallow to deep, nonalkaline to strongly alkaline, excessively to poorly drained, with surface texture from loamy sands, silt loams, to gravelly loams, subsurface textures from sandy loams to heavy clay loams, deep clayey subsoils, and some with cemented pans. These soils occur on dry lake beds, level basin terraces and fans, to gently sloping bottomlands and sand dunes, to moderately steep old fans and lake terraces, to gently undulating and rolling lava plateaus, and some very steep faulted and dissected terrain (0-60+ percent slopes). The effect rooting depth on these soils is very shallow to deep (10-40 inches) and limited primarily by depth to cemented pans and parent material. The area lies within the 8-10 inch precipitation zone yet could receive wide variations in precipitation from drought to wet years.

The allotment is located within two drainage basins. The eastern and northern portion drains into the Owyhee River Basin and the western portion drains into the Malheur Lake Drainage Basin. The lower watershed segments of Wildcat and Bone creeks, that are tributary to Crooked Creek, drain the northeastern portion of the allotment while the southeastern area consists of the headwaters of Crooked Creek. The western area of the allotment functions as the seasonal endpoint of five major drainages (Willow, Whitehorse, Fish, Antelope, and Twelvemile creeks) that all flow into the Coyote Lake system, a dry-lake playa resource. Willow and Whitehorse creeks are the only streams within the allotment that maintain continual flow through the summer and can provide water to the dry-lakebed areas. Much of the flow during the growing season from these two perennial streams is diverted for irrigated hay meadows by the Whitehorse Ranch. Water for livestock throughout the allotment is provided mainly by wells and springs.

3. Air Quality

Air quality is considered to be good in the project area. The eastern boundary of the Coyote Lake Allotment may receive some wind blown dust contaminants from the Alvord Desert.

4. Noxious Weeds

Halogeton (*Halogeton glomeratus*) is present along the Whitehorse Road. The perimeters of Upper Willow Creek Waterhole support significant stands of perennial pepperweed and tamarisk.

5. Livestock

The Coyote Lake Allotment is comprised of approximately 197,000 acres of which 141,000 are federal acres. The remaining acres are owned by the Whitehorse Ranch and Stoddart Ranch and are not fenced separately from the federal acres. There are two permit holders who graze the Coyote Lake Allotment.

Operator	Active Preference	Suspended Preference	Total Preference
Whitehorse Ranch	3014	381	3395
Stoddart Ranch	344	0	344

Totals	3358	381	3739
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The season of use for the Coyote Lake Allotment is winter use every year. The permitted season of use is November 1st to February 28th. Cattle water at Coyote Lake as well as other reservoirs and natural watering areas that fill up during normal years. If winter precipitation is adequate, cattle distribution is very good throughout the entire allotment. However, if winter rains and snows do not create puddles and fill reservoirs, distribution is limited.

6. Wildlife

There are no federal Threatened or Endangered species of wildlife in the proposed action area. Consequently there would be no need to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding Section 7 of The Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Primary species of wildlife that occupy habitats within the proposed action area include the following;

Landbirds : # greater-sage grouse, loggerhead shrike, brewers sparrow, vesper sparrow, horned lark, sage thrasher

Mammals : ## northern kit fox, coyote, badger, mule deer, pronghorn, * pygmy rabbit, antelope ground-squirrel, deer mouse, Great Basin pocket-mouse, kangaroo rat

Reptiles : short-horned lizard, sagebrush lizard, western whiptail

BLM Sensitive and currently under petition for federal listing

Oregon State Threatened

* potentially present; no verified sightings in recent years

Wildlife habitats affected by the proposed action are comprised of dry, low elevation salt desert and sagebrush steppe (Wyoming sagebrush and basin big sagebrush) plant community complexes. According to Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP) science documents these lower elevation sagebrush types have declined substantially in distribution over the last century (more than 30% compared to historic records) due to agricultural development, wildfires and other factors. Both communities are vulnerable habitat alteration from the combined effects of wildfire and cheatgrass invasion.

Virtually all sagebrush habitats present support shrubland communities capable of supporting sage grouse and a variety of other animals dependent upon sagebrush habitat. Adequate forage, cover, and structure for wildlife (consistent with site potential) is present. Existing plant communities do not show evidence of recent wildfires or cultural treatments.

Salt desert communities and sand dune habitat features are preferred habitat for kit fox; a state Threatened species that is rare in Oregon but common in other adjoining western states. Kit fox are limited in Oregon because salt desert

communities are limited in distribution and abundance. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife surveys have documented kit fox presence in the proposed action area.

Pygmy rabbits are primarily (though not exclusively) dependent upon basin big sagebrush communities with canopy cover of 25% or greater in deep friable soils. Historic observations of pygmy rabbits have been made in and around the Coyote allotment though not specifically within the action area. Whether or not pygmy rabbits are resident as breeding populations in the action area is not known.

Due to the arid, low elevation habitat character and lack of springs and meadows the Coyote Allotment appears to be a winter use area only for greater sage-grouse. Winter sage grouse pellet groups were noted within this allotment in the Summer of 2002. Breeding and brood rearing habitats of generally high quality are located to the north and south of the proposed action area in the Sheepheads and Oregon Canyon/Trout Creek Mountains. There are no sage grouse leks identified within the proposed action area.

7. Special Status Plant Species

Three special status plant species are known to exist in this area: Davis peppergrass (*Lepidium davisii*), salt heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*), and solitary milkvetch (*Astragalus solitarius*). None of the species are listed as Threatened or Endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. However, the peppergrass is listed by the state of Oregon as Threatened. It occurs in this area at only one location on a small playa just north of the Whitehorse Road. No utilization by any kind of grazing animal has been recorded for this species at the known sites in the Vale District. Salt heliotrope grows on sand at a few sites near Coyote Playa. As an annual species, its growth and reproduction have been completed by October, and the current year's plants are dead. The solitary milkvetch is found at a number of sites in the area and generally grows under and twines into sagebrush, which affords it considerable protection from grazing.

8. Recreation and Visual Resources

Dispersed outdoor recreation in the proposed allotment consists primarily of hunting of upland birds and big game animals. Some dispersed general sightseeing and day hiking also occurs. According to the Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan the Coyote Lake Allotment is within a visual resource management class I, which has the objective to preserve the existing character of the landscape. Class I provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude very limited management activity. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and must not attract attention.

9. Cultural Resources

Pre-European contact Native American peoples living in southeastern Oregon were entirely dependent upon the locally available food resources. As climatic

fluctuations created population and habitat changes in the plant and animal communities, humans adjusted their hunting and gathering areas and their technology accordingly. The Native people of the Great Basin, who practiced the ancestral life ways into the 19th century, were heirs to an extremely ancient cultural tradition with a technology both effective and efficient, with many multi-functional, light-weight and expendable tools.

Exploration into this area during the Historic period began with the expeditions of John Jacob Aster, after he heard the stories from the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806. The first written observations of southeastern Oregon can be found in journals kept by men involved in the expansion of fur trapping territory. Trapping occurred along the major and minor tributaries of the Owyhee River. The era of the fur trade provided the basis for American families to travel west.

Prehistoric and historic use of southeastern Oregon is documented by the archaeological record. Several archaeological excavations have generated information that establishes long-term human occupation in Malheur and Harney Counties. Excavations at five stratified spring sites indicate that prehistoric people occupied southeast Oregon from about 11,000 to 150 years ago. An excavation at the Dirty Shame rockshelter, on a tributary of the Owyhee River, documented occupation of the shelter from 9500 to 400 years ago.

10. Wilderness Study Area

The Coyote Lake Allotment falls primarily within the Alvord Desert WSA, #OR-2-74. The portion of this 251,060-acre WSA that includes the allotment is the Barren Valley portion. The topography here is flat to gently rolling with only a few rounded ridgelines and shallow drainages to provide diversity to the landscape. The WSA has a high degree of naturalness and offers outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The topography and sheer size of the WSA offer outstanding opportunities for solitude, as well.

11. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

There are no existing or proposed areas of critical environmental concern within the area.

12. Other Mandatory Elements

The following mandatory elements are either not present or would not be affected by the proposed action or alternatives:

Critical Elements	Affected	
	Yes	No
Air Quality		X
Areas of Critical Environmental Concerns		X
Cultural Resources		X
Prime and Unique Farmlands		X
Floodplains		X

Native American Religious Concerns	X
Threatened and Endangered Species	X
Hazardous and Solid Wastes	X
Ground Water Quality	X
Surface Water Quality	X
Wetlands and Riparian Zones	X
Wild and Scenic Rivers	X
Wilderness	X
Invasive and Nonnative Species	X
Environmental Justice	X
Adverse Energy Impacts	X

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Alternative I: Proposed Action

1. Vegetation

Authorization of the proposed change would not cause detrimental affects to the vegetation. The proposed change in grazing use would merely be made at a slightly different time during the same basic fall/winter grazing season. By October 1st, most vegetation has been dormant for several months because of high summer temperatures and a lack of soil moisture. Grazing at this time would be outside of the growing season. A small amount of fall green up could occur if fall precipitation came early, the lows were above freezing and the daily highs remained quite warm. However, if the proposed action is authorized, grazing would still be outside the growing season.

In some years, spring green up occurs from the middle of February through March. The proposed change would expose green plants to grazing for a shorter period than under the existing permit. Use by cattle during spring green up would be reduced by removing the cattle by January 31st.

2. Soils and Water Resources

There would be no new or different impacts to the soil and water resources from the proposed action.

3. Air Quality

The proposed action would not affect air quality.

4. Noxious Weeds

The proposed action would not affect the quantity or distribution of noxious weeds.

5. Livestock

Approving the permit change would allow the operator to better manage his cattle herd within the Coyote Lake Allotment and their private land. Herd health would be increased because the cattle would be fed quality hay for 45 days prior to spring turnout in the Whitehorse Butte Allotment.

6. Wildlife

Due to the fact that proposed changes in livestock grazing involve a shift in use that would occur after the growing season and with no change in the intensity of grazing use, no substantial or significant change to general wildlife forage, cover, or structure would be expected to occur. Consequently the impacts to relatively common species described in the existing environment would be negligible.

Based on current information about greater sage-grouse use, the proposed action would not be expected to result in any adverse impacts to wintering, breeding, or brood rearing habitats. Impacts to kit fox and pygmy rabbit habitat character would also be insignificant.

7. Special Status Plant Species

No additional impacts from the proposed change in grazing season would be anticipated to the special status plant species. Any mechanical damage to the Davis' peppergrass in October from hoof action breaking the brittle stems and causing deep prints in the playa mucks would probably be very similar to mechanical damage in March. However, since the playa is more likely to be dry in October than in March, any damage that may occur is more likely to be less in October than March. Grazing use has not been shown to impact solitary milkvetch at any season, and salt heliotrope has completed its annual life cycle before the proposed grazing period. Therefore, the result is no impact to these species from grazing at the proposed time.

8. Recreation and Visual Resources

The proposed action would have minimal effects on recreation and visual resources as a whole, but could impact the experiences of a small segment of the recreating public. The nature of grazing impacts would remain the same as under the current grazing schedule, but the timing change may affect recreationists in slightly different ways. Visitors used to recreating in the cooler, often pleasant autumn weather of October without the nearby presence of cattle would now find themselves sharing the WSA with livestock in October rather than November. Also, there may be occasional livestock wounding or mortality due to the overlap of deer hunting season with the early turnout of cattle into the WSA.

9. Cultural Resources

The proposed action would have no additional effect on cultural properties in the project area.

10. Wilderness Study Area

The proposed action would probably neither enhance nor degrade WSA values. Naturalness would be affected by the presence of domestic livestock, but simply over a slightly different period of time than exists under the current grazing schedule. Other values (e.g., primitive and unconfined recreation, solitude, species diversity, wild horses, scenery, etc.) would not be expected to change under the proposed action.

11. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

There are no existing or proposed areas of critical environmental concern within the area. Therefore, there are no impacts to such areas.

B. Alternative II: No Action

Under this alternative the permit would remain unchanged.

1. Vegetation

Vegetation would continue to have impacts similar to their current situation. During spring green up certain plants would continue to be stressed because cattle would target the lush fresh tissue.

2. Soils and Water Resources

Soils would remain unchanged.

3. Air Quality

Air quality would remain the same.

4. Noxious Weeds

There would be no change to noxious weeds.

5. Livestock

Livestock would not be allowed in the allotment until November 1. The grazing permit would remain the same as it is now.

6. Wildlife

The environmental impacts of grazing use under the no action alternative would be very similar to those in the proposed action. Given the plant communities present and the known habitat requirements of wildlife present, grazing use does not appear to be resulting in significant adverse impacts to wildlife forage, cover, and structure.

7. Special Status Plant Species

No impacts to special status plant species have been documented from the existing grazing situation. There would be no change with continuation of the current system.

8. Recreation and Visual Resources

Impacts to dispersed recreation activities would remain the same as it is now.

9. Cultural Resources

There would be no affect to cultural or fossil resources as a result of the no action alternative.

10. Wilderness Study Area

There would be no change to current WSA values under the No Action alternative.

11. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

There are no existing or proposed areas of critical environmental concern with the area, therefore, no impacts would occur to such areas.

PERSONS CONSULTED

Britt Lay, Whitehorse Ranch Manager, Coyote Lake Allotment Livestock Permittee

BLM STAFF SPECIALISTS

Tom Miles, Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist

Cameron Rasor, Rangeland Management Specialist

Cynthia Tait, Fisheries Biologist

Jon Sadowski, Wildlife Biologist/T & E Animals

Natalie Sudman, Archeologist

John Whitley, Civil Engineering Technician

Jean Findley, Botanist

Susie Manezes, Realty Specialist

Jack Wenderoth, Soil/Air/Water

Tom Christensen, Recreation/Wilderness

Jerry Erstrom, Weeds Specialist

Vern Pritchard, Engineer

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

I have reviewed EA, OR-030-03-002, and determined that the proposed action will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required. My rationale for this finding of no significant impacts is as follows. The proposed change would not cause detrimental affects to the vegetation. Grazing use would merely be made at a slightly different time during the same basic fall/winter grazing season. By October 1st, most vegetation has been dormant for several months because of high summer temperatures and a lack of soil moisture. Grazing at this time would be outside of the growing season. A small amount of fall green up could occur if fall precipitation came early, the lows were above freezing and the daily highs remained quite warm. However, grazing would still be outside the growing season.

In some years, spring green up occurs from the middle of February through March. The proposed change would expose green plants to grazing for a shorter period than under the existing permit. Use by cattle during spring green up would be reduced by removing the cattle from the Coyote Lake Allotment by January 31st.

The proposed action would neither enhance nor degrade the wilderness study area. Values such as primitiveness, unconfined recreation, solitude, species diversity, wild horses, scenery, etc would still be available to the public; and not be affected by the proposed action. Soils, air quality, noxious weeds, wildlife, special status plant species, recreation, cultural resources, and areas of critical environmental concerns would not be affected.

Allowing this permit change is a reasonable action. No impacts were identified that would significantly affect any aspect of the human environment. I have determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the land use plan.

s/Susie K. Manezes, Acting Field Manager
Signature of Authorized Official

June 23, 2003
Date